DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 530 CS 213 698

AUTHOR Craft, Julia
TITLE Sex Stereotypes in Children's Literature.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Elementary Education; English Curriculum; *English Instruction; Foreign Countries; *Reading Instruction; *Sex Bias; *Sex Stereotypes; Social Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Cultural Sensitivity; Male Female Relationship

ABSTRACT

The problem of sex stereotyping in children's literature has been around for as long as the genre itself, but it was brought to the forefront because of the women's movement in the 1970s. From the 1700s, critics were aware of the problems that arose from children's literature and its portrayal of characters and ideas, including "Cinderella" and "Robinson Crusoe." Society's views about children have altered over time. Today, psychologists are beginning to recognize the danger of expecting a certain kind of behavior from males or females, based on sex roles prescribed by society. Teachers must try to present children with a more realistic and complete view of society that avoids the sex typing that has existed since children's literature first emerged as a genre. Females, for example, have traditionally been attributed with negative characteristics and as having limited career choices. Females have been pictured as subservient to males. Female characters have been projected with narrow characteristics, and hardly ever heroic or even as protagonists. In short, teachers must try to keep these past sex biases away from their students by screening carefully the materials that they assign. Children must be encouraged to break down the social barriers that have been established through literature and through time. Teachers must not rely upon the expected, but should strive for something more. (HB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED354530

SEX STEREOTYPES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

BY JULIA CRAFT

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Julia Craft

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS213698

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I. Recognizing Sex Stereotyping In Children's Literature.

The problem of sex stereotyping in children's literature has been around for as long as the genre itself. Questions about racism and violence has been recognized for many years. However, it was the women's movement of the 1970's which brought sex stereotyping to the forefront. The accepted beliefs of what a proper little girl or little boy should be like was different during different time periods. Females traditionally were taught to suppress their intelligence and individuality whereas males were expected to act the opposite way. (Glazer 420) Children's literature depicts their characters in the same manner that society at that particular time, dictated to them.

In the late 1700's Mrs. Sarah Trimmer, a critic with impeccable credentials, began editing a book on educational styles. Even at this early date, Mrs. Trimmer saw the problems that arose from children's literature and their portrayal of characters and ideas. The story of Cinderella, she noted,

> paints some of the worst passions that can enter into the human breast, and of which little children should, if possible, be totally ignorant; such as envy, jealousy, a dislike of mothers-in-law and half sisters, vanity, a love of dress... (St. John 49)

Aimed toward the female market, Cinderella introduces

concepts which Mrs. Trimmer feels should not be dealt with. Girls should not be envious or vain or jealous, all of which were considered unladylike. Conversely, Robinson Crusoe was targeted for the young male market. Mrs. Trimmer had her concerns about the stereotyping involved, "it might lead children into an early taste for a rambling life, and a desire of adventure" (St. John 50). Even though this is a more accepted portrayal of boys, Mrs. Trimmer was able to identify the potential problem. Both of these particular children's books which Mrs. Trimmer shows as examples were well known and highly respected. Questioning their credibility was almost unthinkable. Mrs. Trimmer was able to set tradition aside and focus on the content. The stereotypes that she recognized were disturbingly forceful.

The last few centuries have seen different philosophies about who the child is. With regard to literature young people have been seen in many lights.

> Puritans viewed their offspring as sinners headed for hell. In later ages, unspoiled goodness and humor came to dominate the portraits of young people. Today, many observers have adopted what is in some ways an earlier view: the child is again like an adult in facing heavy social problems (Glazer 435).

The ideas about children do not change overnight. The opinions of society gradually bend and change over long

periods of time.

> They indicate merely that a group of people in that time viewed their daughters and sons in a certain way. And their identification of their children strongly affected what young people got to read... (Glazer 435-36)

Not only did the stereotypes in literature change, but society's idea of acceptable children's literature also changed. Books such as Mark Twain's Huckleberry Fin captured society's prejudices of the time but were later banned by some schools as being inappropriate. Today, Huckleberry Fin is once again considered acceptable.

II. Sex-Typing

The social values and biases of authors have always affected children's literature. The women's movement highlighted what had already been a concern for developmental psychologists. These psychologists felt that unfortunately, "...most people believed that acquisition of `appropriate' sex typing was essential for normal, healthy development" (Houston 3). It was thought that boys should learn how to become masculine while girls were to become feminine. This appeared to be the dominant trend until recently. Today, researchers search for a, "means for socializing children toward `androgyny' or away from socially prescribed sex roles (Houston 4). Only now do people recognize the danger of expecting a certain kind of behavior. Individuality is

still stressed but can be expressed through an androgynous sexuality as opposed to the main criteria of difference being boy or girl. The women's movement opposed girls being considered feminine first, rather than an individual.

Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what girls are made of. Rats and snails and puppy dog tails, that's what boys are made of.

This simple, time honored rhyme held true the feelings of that time and in a way still do. Males and females learn more about the definitions of masculinity and femininity as they grow. "At any age, however, boys usually have more pronounced stereotypes than girls. Girls...view more activites and behaviors as equally appropriate for both sexes than boys do" (Houston 9). From the beginning, males are encouraged to segregate themselves from females. It is the man who is the bread winner, protector and problem solver. Boys are encouraged to picture things as their job, not just something anyone can do.

Sex typing has existed from the beginning in children's literature. Unfortunately, it will continue to exist to some degree. We must present children with a more realistic and complete view of society.

> Authors owe all children the right to
> see themselves as a fully functioning
> person with an array of career choices.
> They owe every child a positive and
> realistic picture of the world of work

today and tomorrow, not just yesterday (Britton 731).

It is imperative for children to understand that we have equal opportunities in this society. There are no longer any set rules as to who should do what and whether or not it is considered appropriate.

III. Types Of Sexist Writing

Traditionally in children's literature females have had limited roles. The female characters have often been attributed with negative characteristics. Often they are seen as "incapable of problem solving and dependent on male initiative" (Bordelon 793). Females were pictured as being subservient to males and dominated by them. The predominance of male characters can be viewed throughout the history of children's literature. Traditionally, males have not only been the main characters, but the heros as well. In Sir Gwayne and the Green Knight it is the men who save the kingdom. In Jack and the Beanstalk we picture Jack as a hero saving the magic harp from certain death and his mother from a life of poverty (Glazer 423). Women are rarely given the opportunity to shine on their own.

Females are often portrayed as having occupational goals and even life goals which are expected. The literature has served to not only down play their capabilities, but limit their choices. Females are all too often "depicted as nurses, secretaries or teachers" (Bordelon 793). Females are discouraged from expressing their wishes and therefore

their full potential. Children's literature, whether it is sexist or not, has an effect on the socialization of children. Socialization, refers to the process by which "a person slowly develops a set of values and attitudes, goals and purposes, patterns of response and concept of self" (Smith 401). Self image is something which occurs in a person gradually throughout his or her lifetime. The role is developed through 3 aspects. "Duties, status and temperament" (Smith 402). How children react with others is very much a learned process. Boys and girls imitate what they consider to be appropriate action. Books at an early age become acceptable to children. What they see and hear in these works will affect what they say and do in real life.

IV. Socialization Skills

Today there has been a move to balance the scales of acceptable social behavior. The stereotypes which have existed in literature must begin to even themselves out. There are few female protagonists and fewer still the number of popular books with female protagonists. We have seen that "...The images of the female character are narrowly defined and frequently negative; and the images of boys are positive but limited to the traditional male stereotype" (Smith 407). Males and females have both been stuck in their respective categories without a great chance for escape. The case is more visible with females seeing how the bias is of a more negative form, however, the social skills of both sexes are dramatically affected.

It is a current concern for teachers to screen, to some degree, what younger readers have access to. By no means is there a suggestion of censorship but with the younger children we must be careful of what we present to them.

> Teachers need to actively and consciously select books that present a more balanced view of sex roles. A commitment to preparing all the young persons to be capable of determining equality of their own lives requires that educators may inhibit them in any way based on their gender (Smith 407).

Children must be encouraged to break down the social barriers that have been established through literature and through time. They must be taught to appreciate all that they can accomplish and be encouraged to do just that. Be it good or bad what we read affects who we are. We must be careful that we don't rely upon the expected but strive for something more.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bordelon, Kathleen W. "Sexism in Reading Materials," Readin Teacher 38 (1985): 792-97.

Britton, Gwyneth. "The Battle To Imprint Citizens For The 21st Century." Reading Teacher 37 (1984): 724-33.

Glazer, Joan. Introduction To Children's Literature. New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1979.

Houston, Aletha C. "Sex Typing and Socialization." ERIC, 1982. ED222285.

Smith, Nancy J. "Making The Literate Environment Equitable." Reading Teacher. 40 (1987): 400-07.

St. John, Judith. "Mrs. Trimmer- Guardian of Education." The Horn Book Magazine 60 (1970): 20-25.